

# Paul in Athens: Christianity in a classical context

**Teresa Morgan**

Many of us are familiar with the New Testament figure of the early Christian missionary Paul (or Saul, as he was known in Jewish circles before his conversion). We know him most strikingly of all for his vision of Christ in heaven, which struck him on the road between Jerusalem and Damascus, a couple of years after Jesus had been crucified. The vision transformed Paul's life. From being a faithful Jew he suddenly burned to convert people to following Christ.

But Paul is not only a name to conjure with in the context of religious studies. He was also an inhabitant of the Classical world and it is only when we put these two contexts together that we really understand Paul properly. Paul came from Tarsus in Cilicia, modern southern Turkey, a thriving Greek-speaking town with some Roman citizens. He was apparently a tent maker by trade, and he may have been a Roman citizen. Coming from Tarsus, he had a completely different view of his potential audience from most earlier converts. Not Israel, but the wider Roman Empire was his arena.

## **Missionary travels**

Between the late 30s and the late 50s, Paul made three long, rambling missionary journeys around the eastern Mediterranean. He followed trade routes, sailing from port to port, and the major Roman roads between large cities. He crossed and recrossed the Ionian seaboard, Asia Minor, Phoenicia, Eastern Greece, and made the occasional foray to Jerusalem to argue with the other apostles, who regarded him as eccentric at best and thoroughly dangerous at worst. It was on his second journey, perhaps in the early 50s, that Luke reports that he went to Athens.

Our knowledge of Paul's activities comes from two sources. There are the surviving letters he wrote to some of the communities he founded. And there is an account of his journeys written around the end of the first century by the author tradition knows as Luke. Luke wrote a biography of Jesus, and then, uniquely, a sequel, the Acts of the Apostles, and he claims to have accompanied Paul on some of his journeys.

Some, though not all of the events Luke reports appear in Paul's letters. Paul mentions that he has been to Athens in a letter to the Thessalonians, but he gives no details. Luke, however, gives us a long description of the visit, and it is clear that for him it is a very important episode.

## **Paul in Athens**

Paul arrives in Athens on his way to found what will become a famous – indeed notorious – Christian community in Corinth. As usual, he makes first for the synagogue. Jews are the most obvious target audience for conversion, since Jesus was Jewish and his message of repentance and forgiveness by God is a very Jewish one. As often, however, the synagogue is not receptive, so Paul goes to the Agora, the central market-place, to try the message on the gentiles. 'Now the Athenians,' says Luke, 'would spend all their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.' They are delighted to hear that someone has arrived with a new idea. Stoic and Epicurean philosophers

engage Paul in conversation. Then they take him up the Areopagus hill to get him to present his case.

It seems that the speech which Luke gives Paul, like speeches in ancient historians such as Thucydides and Livy, probably bears little resemblance to what was actually said, but was manipulated by Luke to bring out particular points. What Paul says about God here is very different from the kind of thing he says in his letters. In the letters, it is the risen Christ who brings salvation to humanity. In this speech, the focus is on God the creator, not Christ the redeemer of the world. Paul would usually tell people to turn to Christ, have faith, die to the world and prepare themselves for the last judgement, the resurrection of the dead and the coming of Christ in glory; but here he starts by telling the Athenians that the 'Unknown God' they worship is actually the One God, the God of Israel, who made human beings such that they cannot help searching until they find him. It is time to find him now, because the last judgement is imminent. There is no mention of Christ, or faith, or dying to the world; the whole world seems to be included.

## **Speaking to the time and the place**

Why did Luke write Paul such an atypical speech? It may be that Paul himself took an unusual line because the Athenians were an unusual audience; more likely, Luke did it for him. Either way, the key surely lies in the fact that this is Athens. The speech was ideal for the occasion and the location, and fits what we know about Athens at this period from our 'Classics' sources. In the first century, Athens no longer has any real political power. But it is still the birthplace of philosophy, one of the great centres of culture, a city to which wealthy and ambitious Greeks and Romans flock to finish their education and acquire the high polish that will help make their careers. What Athens thinks, matters. And if Paul, or Luke, can persuade people that the new teaching about Christ is very close to something that already exists in Athens, and that the Athenians approve of it, it will be a major propaganda coup.

Luke sets out to persuade his readers very cleverly. First, he has Paul taken to the Areopagus, site of Athens' most ancient court. A point made on the Areopagus is a point made with authority. He flatters the Athenians by telling them that they already know the God he is talking about. This is no dubious foreign deity which they might not want to adopt; they already worship him. Paul points out that gods are not made of metal or stone and do not live in temples – an idea which sophisticated Athenians would readily accept. It is easy to imagine such a god being everywhere and belonging to all peoples. What is more, Paul says, he is the one and only God. The idea that ultimately there is only one God was increasingly fashionable at this time, as was the idea that cults might belong not to a particular city, but to a community of worshippers who might live anywhere. Luke's version of Paul's message is perfectly calculated to catch the mood of the times.

Best of all, Paul tells the Athenians that Greek poets have spoken of this God. And he quotes a line from the Hellenistic poet Aratus to prove it, showing that he is the kind of cultured person that Athenians can have confidence in.

### Broadening the audience

The speech goes down well. Paul leaves Athens immediately, but Luke reports that some people were converted, and names two of them. Apparently whatever Paul said, was effective. But if this speech is Luke's invention, then the real Athenians did not get this particular, very clever pitch. So why write it?

The real audience must be the people who read Acts. There is much debate about who read early Christian texts. Christians themselves? Presumably: gospels, collections of sayings, letters, sermons and treatises were used to teach, preserve and develop the tradition. People who were interested in converting? Very likely: texts would be one source of instruction. Jews, Greeks and Romans in general? They were much less likely to be interested. But if so, Paul's speech on the Areopagus seems to miss its target audience.

Perhaps not entirely. Paul converted many non-Jews to Christianity, and some of them found it very difficult to reconcile the culture they came from with their new Christian beliefs. They were not sure whether they should go on reading Homer or Virgil, with their stories about the pagan gods. Or Plato and other philosophers, with their profound, but not specifically Christian discussions of justice or goodness. It would take 400 years for Christians to decide finally that it was all right to read non-Christian literature provided you did it in a Christian spirit. But in this speech, Luke seems to be striking an early blow for syncretism: the idea that pagan literature, philosophy and even religious ideas can be incorporated into Christianity.

Luke saw Paul take the Christian message further than any of the first followers of Jesus could have dreamed – eventually to Rome itself. He may have seen his books as taking the message further still. Books were not necessarily expensive and could be read by perhaps as much as twenty per cent of the population of the empire. If children in Gallic towns and Egyptian villages could read Euripides and Horace, why not Luke? In the event, it took a long time to achieve quite that circulation. But when it happened, Luke's message to the Athenians became a message the whole of the known world wanted to hear.

*Teresa Morgan teaches at Oriel College Oxford. Her book on Literate Education in the Hellenistic and Roman Worlds is published by Cambridge University Press.*

### Paul's speech from Acts of the Apostles 17.22–28.

Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, 'Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him – though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For 'In him we live and move and have our being', as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we too are his offspring'.'